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ABSTRACT

This guide is designed for use by counselors and teachers working with adult basic education (ABE) students. Discussed first is the importance of viewing adult learners as clients. The unique characteristics of the ABE student are examined. Presented next is an adult counseling model that includes the following program participation phases: initial inquiry and intake, assessment and diagnosis, placement, program participation, termination, and followup. Concluding the guide is a section dealing with the special skills of listening and responding, goal-setting and problem-solving, program-planning and group-counseling, assessment and diagnosis, and consultation and referral needed by practitioners working with ABE students. (MN)

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COUNSELING THE ADULT BASIC EDUCATION STUDENT

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Introduction

When we, as adult educators and counselors, undertake the task of setting up counseling programs for our students, one thing becomes glaringly apparent: We are working with a unique population in a unique setting. What seems to work for counselors in other settings just doesn't seem to work for us. This appears to be especially true if our adult learner population is one that consists primarily of basic education students.

What makes these students unique as counseling clients? What are their particular needs and characteristics? How can we most effectively provide counseling services to these adults? What special skills are needed in working with this population?

These questions continually confront us as we are challenged to develop student services which are helpful to our adult students. The discussion which follows attempts to address some of these questions and to develop a model of counseling to guide our counseling services in the Adult Basic Education Program.

Adult Learners as Clients

Adults are special people. With ages ranging from sixteen to eighty-six, adult populations are incredibly heterogeneous in terms of life experiences, ages, life stages, and transitional events. Interests, abilities, values, and needs also vary so greatly, that counselors of adults are sometimes at a loss to find any common ground to organize their approach to

counseling (see Figure 1). If there is a common ground, it is diversity.

What does this diversity mean to the adult and to the counselor of adults? It means that adults as counseling clients are complex and unique. Change is a major characteristic of adult life. Adults are continually faced with endless series of life decisions. Life transitions and stages have become the hallmark of adult life. Adults also bear a host of responsibilities and roles. Understanding the changes, responsibilities and transitions of adult life is perhaps the greatest challenge of the adult counselor.

A number of theorists have attempted to increase our understanding of these life processes.

Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson & McKee (in Eisenberg, 1979) have described a sequence of six developmental periods for men between the ages of 18 and 45. These periods are:

1. Getting into the adult world (ages 21-29). During this time the task is "to explore the adult world, to arrive at an initial definition of oneself as an adult, and to fashion an initial life structure that provides a viable link between the valued self and the wider adult world."

2. Age 30 transition (28-32). A time of assessing the initial life structure before making a greater commitment during the next stage.

3. Settling down (early 30's to early 40's). Thrust is toward independence in the world of work.

4. Mid-life transition (early to mid-40's). A renewed evaluation of

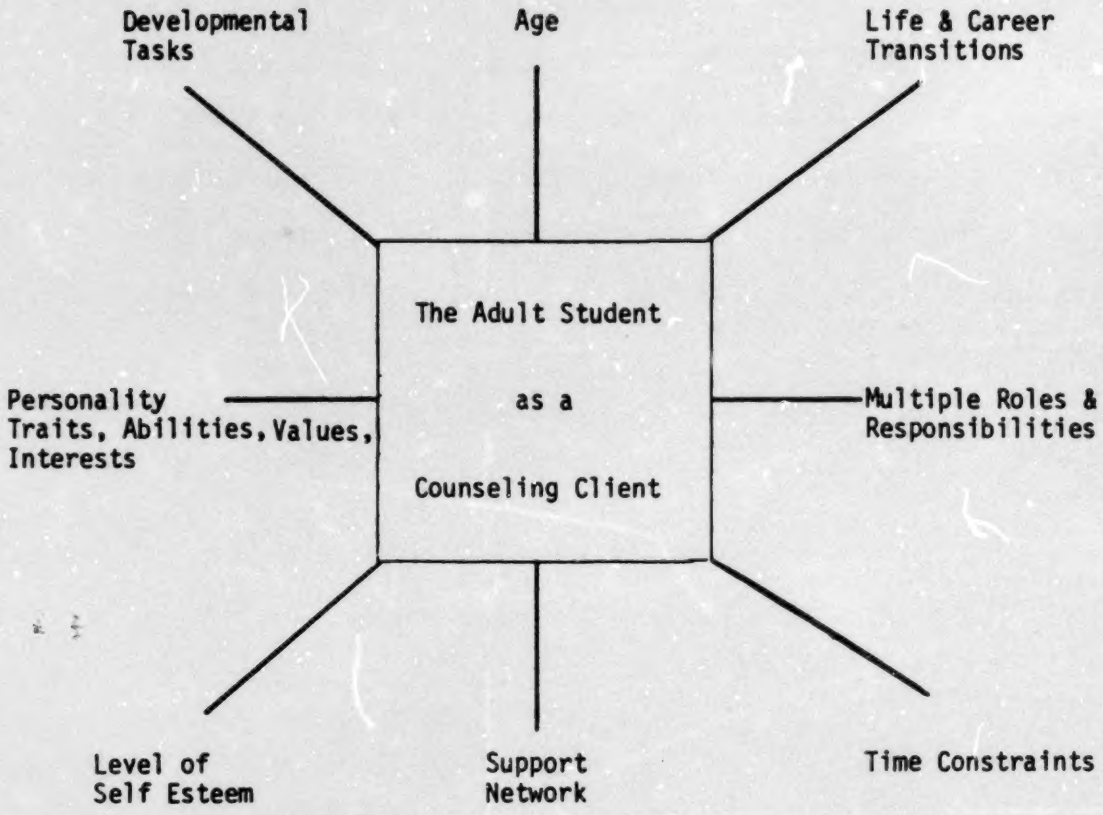

Figure 1. The Adult Student as a Counseling Client

one's life structure in comparison with the dreams one had for one's life. Bodily decline and mortality are recognized.

6. Restabilization (around age 45).

Although popular, these stages reflect development of middle class males, the group from which the initial information was obtained. Gail Sheehy (1976) applied these ages and stages to the lives of women providing us with some information about the development of our female adult students. Other authors have focused their attention less on ages and stages and more on the transitions which are common to all adults. Transitions are turning points during which a person moves from one life role to another. Empty nests, or death of spouse are two examples of these transitional periods for adults (Scholossberg, 1981).

A study of Adult Learners across the United States (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980) found that 83% reported a transition in their lives as the major trigger for their learning. Whatever our view of the adult development process, then, it is clear that adult educators and counselors must be sensitive to the life changes of the adult student. Our sensitivity, however, must not overshadow the student's needs. Cross (1981) observed that adults are very pragmatic in their approach to learning. Imposing unwanted "transitional" counseling may impede the progress of the adult learner. The counselor is caught in a dilemma of choosing invitational or impositional means for offering services to adults who come to adult educational programs. While the adult learner states an initial need only for educational services, it is still likely that transitional counseling services are needed. The counselor must choose a balanced approach to offering services.

It is here that we see the differences in counseling adult learners as compared with public high school students or mental health agency clients. High school students are a captive audience. Their days are structured by the high school which they attend. Student services can be used during free periods, lunch breaks, or after school. Programs can be introduced during class time. The adult learner, on the other hand, is extremely limited in time, with participation in educational programs being wedged between work schedules, babysitters, and household responsibilities. Class time is seen as especially valuable. Finding time for counseling is difficult for the counselor and the client alike in the adult education setting.

There are also differences between the counseling services offered in mental health agencies and those offered through adult education programs. While adults may come to adult education programs when they are in crisis or during a transitional period, they do not initially see the educational program as a counseling service. They may even have shunned the idea of going to a mental health agency and may have come to the educational program in an attempt to resolve their problems through other means. It is not uncommon for the adult education counselor to encounter students who are in crisis, or whose problems go beyond the scope of the counselor's training or the goals of the adult education counseling service.

Most often the goals of the education counseling service are to provide developmental interventions which enhance the growth of the program participants. This can be distinguished from mental health counseling in that the mental health setting typically provides therapy and prevention services

(Danish et al., 1980). Adult education clients in need of extensive psychotherapy are usually best served if they are referred to appropriate agencies.

The more typical adult learner, however, comes to us at times of readiness and receptivity to learning which Cyril Houle (Cross, 1981) called the "teachable moment." This readiness encompasses all aspects of the person's life: personal, occupational, spiritual, and educational. The challenge to adult educators, it appears, is to provide the most comprehensive program of learning and support services possible to ensure success and growth at this time of extreme receptivity.

The Unique Characteristics of the Adult Basic Education Student

Adult Basic Education students enter our programs with additional needs and concerns. These needs and concerns make success and growth more difficult for the A.B.E. student. A.B.E. students, for example, have been found to have lower levels of self-esteem than other adult populations (Champagne & Young, 1981). Self-esteem is thought to play a major role in the continued participation of adult students in educational programs (Cross, 1981). We cannot counsel, teach, or in any way enhance the development of our A.B.E. students if we cannot retain them.

This lack of self-esteem is also coupled with previous failures in educational settings for the A.B.E. student. The A.B.E. student then, is especially vulnerable to stress in the adult education program.

These stresses could be readily overcome were it not for additional stresses encountered by the A.B.E. students in their home and work environments. While it is not accurate to assume that most basic education stu-

dents are economically disadvantaged, they are quite likely to be at a disadvantage as they compete for jobs and economic resources because of their limited educational backgrounds. Low educational level has been linked to lower socio-economic status in many studies (National Advisory Council on Adult Education, 1974).

What does this mean for the A.B.E. student? It means that difficult situations and life stresses often cannot be overcome by economic means. Babysitters and housekeepers can't be afforded. Books and transportation are lacking. Coping resources may be strained to the limit.

Support networks may also be lacking for the A.B.E. student. Spouses or living partners, when they exist, may not encourage the A.B.E. student's participation in the educational program or in counseling for fear that the student will in some way change. Single parents and widows or widowers are common participants in the A.B.E. program. Few have friends, family or co-workers who support their educational efforts or who encourage them to grow during a transitional period.

At the very least then, the A.B.E. counselor can play a major role in building self-esteem, reducing stress, and in providing needed support.

An Adult Counseling Model for Guiding Counseling Practice

The counselor in the Adult Basic Education Program has the opportunity to provide support, reduce stress, and enhance self-esteem during all phases of the student's program. Interventions can occur from the point of the student's initial inquiry to follow-up interventions after the student leaves the program. (See figure 2.)

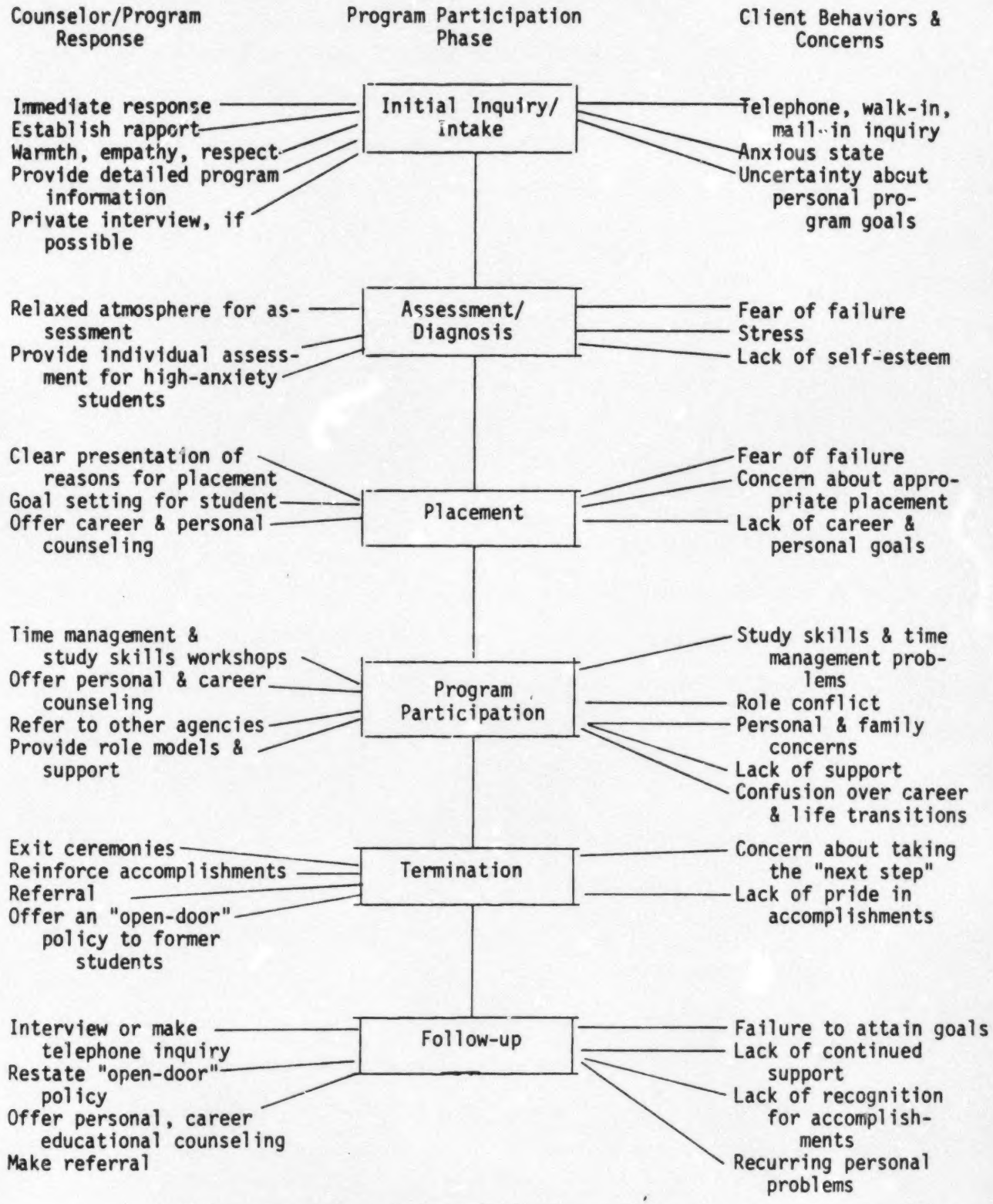

Figure 2: A Counseling Intervention Model for Counseling the A.B.E. Student

During the initial inquiry phase, for example, counselors can respond with warmth and empathy to the student, encourage the discussion of personal concerns and possible solutions, and provide complete explanation of the program. An immediate response is most effective at this point. The student should be given printed literature about the program. While it may be ideal to have a counselor available at program inquiry (especially for walk-ins), clerical workers or administrators are more typically available at this time. The program counselor may then need to discuss rapport-building skills with those persons who respond to the initial inquiry. Telephone inquiries and mail-ins should be handled with warm, supportive responses as well.

Registration and orientation procedures give the counselor additional opportunities to make effective interventions. Academic and career planning can occur, personal concerns can be discussed, and the availability of counseling services can be mentioned. More importantly, the counselor has the opportunity to enhance rapport and motivate the student at this critical time.

Assessment procedures quite often create the most stressful time for new students. A relaxed atmosphere should be provided during the assessment if possible. Individual assessments procedures should be offered to students who seem very threatened by testing procedures. Assessment gives the counselor, teachers, and directors an opportunity to diagnose student needs and to appropriately place the student in a program which best meets those needs. Achievement levels, learning problems, learning styles, career interests, and counseling needs can also be assessed at this time.

Placement of the student into an appropriate program also extends the opportunity to interact with the student in a supportive way. The counselor and student have a chance to work together to establish personal, educational, and career goals for the student at this time. Fear of failure and lack of self-esteem may be issues facing the student when placement is discussed. A counselor who is well-tuned to these concerns may offer additional encouragement during placement.

It is probably during the student's actual participation in the program that new and additional concerns may occur. Students may become aware of study skill and time management problems once the program begins. Personal and family concerns may crop up, as well as the strain of managing multiple roles and responsibilities. Lack of support from family and friends may hinder the student's efforts to succeed in the program. The student's confusion over career planning and life transitions may become intensified. Unquestionably, an available counseling service that reaches out to students is needed here. Group and individual counseling can be used right through to termination from the program. Teachers, directors, and other staff can make valuable contributions at this time. Additional career and life planning may be needed just prior to termination.

Termination itself possesses a unique challenge to counselors. Helping students achieve their personal goals extends beyond the walls of the adult education building. Students leaving the program need some ceremony to make the separation a positive one. Parties, graduations, or certificates help to make the separation process a memorable one and to reinforce the idea of "success" at completing an educational program. It is also a chance to say

"goodbye" and to make students aware of any continued support that will be provided. Referral to other programs can be made as well.

Finally, while most adult education staff members have little time to do so, follow-up counseling by telephone or personal interview can ensure that the student is achieving his or her original goals. Support and referral advice can be offered readily if this is done.

Special Skills for the A.B.E. Counselor

Counselors of Adult Basic Education students require a very broad range of skills in order to be effective with this unique and diverse group. These skills can be grouped into five general areas:

1. Listening and responding skills.
2. Assessment and diagnosis.
3. Goal setting and problem solving.
4. Program planning and group counseling skills.
5. Referral skills.

Figure 3 identifies the specific skills required in each area. Listening and responding skills form the basic core of skills necessary for establishing rapport and for encouraging a client to talk about his or her problem. Without these skills a counselor will be less than effective in all other areas. Allen Ivey (1983) has identified these specific skills as being basic to the entire communication process. In order to establish rapport with a client, for example, the counselor must maintain eye contact with the client, recognizing the comfort or discomfort of the client in doing so. Insecure Adult Basic Education clients may be threatened by intense and direct eye contact. The counselor may, however, establish rapport by "matching" the body language and vocal qualities of the student. Warmth, empathy, and positive

Figure 3: Special Counseling Skills for the A.B.E. Counselor

Listening and Responding Skills

- Establishing rapport
- Responding with warmth, empathy and positive regard
- Maintaining appropriate amount of eye contact
- Matching client's body language and vocal qualities
- Use of open- and closed-ended questions
- Encouraging, summarizing, and paraphrasing
- Reflection of feeling and meaning

Assessment and Diagnosis Skills

- Assessing educational and functional skill level
- Diagnosing the client's level of emotional functioning
- Assessing the type of personal problems & concerns
- Evaluating interests, values, and needs related to career planning

Goal Setting and Problem Solving

- Defining problems mutually with a client
- Gathering information
- Identifying assets and liabilities
- Developing plans of action
- Exploring emotions which prevent goal attainment

Program Planning and Group Counseling

- Assessing student needs
- Developing program objectives
- Developing and implementing program plans
- Evaluating program outcomes
- Leading and managing groups

Consultation and Referral

- Consulting with adult education and social agency staffs
- Developing a comprehensive referral network
- Teaching other professionals about the developmental needs of adults

regard for the client are also counselor behaviors which can enhance the relationship between the couneslor and the client (Rogers, 1975).

Once a relationship has been established between the counselor and the student, the student can begin to explore his or her concerns. The counselor needs to be skilled at using open and closed ended questions, particularly open-ended ones. For example, it is more effective to say, "How does your family feel about your coming to classes?" than to say "Does your family like you coming to classes?" Typically, the quiet student will respond with a "yes" or "no" answer to the latter, closed-ended question.

Counselors need also be reminded to use minimal encouragers to talk such as "uh, huh," nods, and "yeses." Paraphrasing and summarizing the client's statement will also encourage the client to continue and will help promote a better understanding of the problem. Reflecting the client's feelings ("You seem tense as you say that," "that really makes you angry") also promotes understanding.

Assessment and diagnosis skills come in to play at this point. While educational and functional skill assessment may be the major task at this phase for program planning, assessing the personal concerns and problems of the student may be more important for the student. Eisenberg (1979) has suggested that there are three basic categories by which a counselor can diagnose an adult client's level of personal functioning:

1. Clients facing situational problems that have temporarily overtaxed coping skills.
2. Clients facing developmental problems that are characterized by ineffective or uncomfortable responses to their changing maturity.

3. Clients with potentially debilitating levels of psychopathology.

Clearly the third category is beyond the scope of services and skills of the adult education counselor. The ability to recognize or diagnose severe problems is, however, a necessary skill for the A.B.E. counselor.

Problems can also be categorized according to the Tyler-Gilmore Framework for Appraisal and Intervention (Delworth, 1981). This framework suggests that people come to counselors for three basic problems:

1. Problems of Choice.
2. Problems about Change.
3. Confusion Reduction.

A counselor who is skilled in identifying the type of problem will be effective in helping the client to define his or her problem and to establish personal goals. Adult Basic Education students frequently do not come from environments which stress "rational" problem solving. Hence, the counselor will need to be skilled in helping clients identify their assets and liabilities, in gathering information, in establishing goals, in generating alternatives, in developing a plan of action, and in exploring the emotions which prevent the student from achieving goals.

Other skills needed for counselors in the A.B.E. Program are more centered on the counselor's ability to plan programs for groups and to provide group counseling. The counselor must be able to assess and identify student needs which would be best met in a group counseling or workshop format. The counselor must be able to develop program objectives, to determine how these objectives will be met in the form of a particular program, and to be able

to evaluate the outcome of the group program. In addition to planning the program, the counselor must possess group leadership skills such as giving and receiving feedback, identifying group member roles, and directing a group. Career planning, assertion training and retirement planning are topics which are quite often the focus of such groups.

One final area of skills for the A.B.E. counselor is that of consultation and referral. The A.B.E. counselor, with limited time and resources, is no doubt unable to meet all of the counseling needs of the students in any one program. Teachers, directors, and clerical staff can be consulted and asked to help. Other social agencies and educational services have needed resources and programs which can extend our abilities to help the Adult Basic Education student. A comprehensive network of helping professionals should be developed and catalogued so that all program personnel can assist students in need of help. Finally, the skilled counselor can serve as an educator to other adult educators and social service agency personnel concerning the development of the Adult Basic Education student. Teaching and public speaking skills would therefore be an asset for the A.B.E. Counselor.

The task of developing counseling programs for the A.B.E. student is not an easy one. We are challenged to develop a wide array of skills and to use those skills in a systematic way. Finding and using a framework for counseling adult learners that meets the needs of our students will help us to be more effective with this very special population.

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